



## Seniors and Pets

### FEATURE ARTICLE

## Pets: They're More Than Just Pretty Faces

When Olivia Rogers' husband Thomas died two years ago, her shiny outlook on life began to grow dim. "We used to do everything together. At times, I felt this terrible emptiness," explains Rogers. "He was my best friend."

That's where Buddy, the 8-year old German Shepard mix came in.

Olivia's son, Frank, had heard that pets offer wonderful companionship to older adults who suddenly find themselves alone. That's why he adopted the canine from the local animal shelter.

"At first, I was a little nervous about introducing a 35-pound dog to a small and relatively frail woman," recalls Frank. "But the shelter staff reassured me that he came from a loving home, was well behaved, and well trained. Buddy also seemed to have an affinity for older people. He was very gentle with my mother when he met her. They bonded immediately."

Olivia and Buddy are now great pals. They spend a lot time together taking walks around the neighborhood and lounging in the back yard. Olivia says Buddy also provides her with an added sense of safety and protection because he often alerts her to approaching guests, before she even hears them.

"Who wouldn't love a face like this?" asks Olivia as Buddy nudges her for attention by gently placing his paw on her knee. "He's a constant source of joy in my life."

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) estimates that there are 65 million dogs and 77 million cats kept as pets in America. That's a lot of fur flying around! Dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, and other companion animals are considered by many to be "members of the family." Many people talk to their pets, travel with them, buy them holiday gifts, and even celebrate their birthdays!

Older Americans have a special bond with their pets, particularly if they live alone or far from loved ones. Kelly Connolly of the HSUS says that "By now just about everyone knows that an elderly person who has a companion animal in her life can expect to enjoy many physical and emotional benefits, including lower blood pressure, improved social skills, reduced stress, and increased physical activity." And of course, dogs and cats are fuzzy, cuddly, and perfect to snuggle with when an elder wants an extra dose of unconditional love.

What some seniors may not know is that in addition to their endearing qualities, some companion animals play important roles in their owner's lives. In fact, some pets are so important that their owners would not be able to function without them. These types of pets are known as "service animals." They are most commonly dogs and cats, but fish, birds, rabbits and other animals can also be trained for service.

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There are two types of service animals—"assistance animals" and "therapy animals." Assistance animals, including guide dogs for the visually impaired, hearing dogs for the hearing impaired, and mobility assistance dogs for persons with physical disabilities, are specially trained to help individuals that have physical or mental disabilities. These animals can be trained to open doors, turn on lights, and even alert authorities in a medical emergency.

Therapy animals, serve by interacting with people in health care, social, educational, and recreational settings. In health care settings, therapy animals facilitate physical and psychological sessions with patients. They also visit with patients, who are encouraged to pet, interact, and play with them. Therapy animals are also used in hospices, nursing homes, hospitals, short-term care facilities, and even residential dwellings.

Pets help people live longer, healthier lives, by increasing their physical and emotional well-being. Go ahead and "Celebrate Long Term-Living" by interacting with a pet you love today!

For more information on how to find a pet, visit [www.hsus.org/pets](http://www.hsus.org/pets); for help in finding pet-friendly rental housing, visit [www.rentwithpets.org](http://www.rentwithpets.org); and for behavior advice, visit [www.petsforlife.org](http://www.petsforlife.org).

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The Humane Society of the United States is the nation's largest animal protection organization with more than 8.5 million members and constituents. The group is based in Washington, DC and has numerous field representatives across the country. On the web at [www.hsus.org](http://www.hsus.org).

As the nation celebrates Older Americans Month in May, you can learn more about companion animals and other topics by visiting [www.aoa.gov](http://www.aoa.gov). The theme of Older Americans Month—"Celebrate Long-Term Living!"—highlights the goal of organizations throughout the Aging Network to help older Americans stay healthy and active longer. For information about local resources, contact the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116, or visit [www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov).



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